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FILLING THE VOID OR FILLING THE FULL? ON THE CONCEPT OF GRACE

Abstract

Grace is not sacrifice: it is the opposite of sacrifice in the field of religious language and experience. Nowhere as in the idea of the Holy Trinity does the overcoming of the principle of narrow or strict distribution of space and resources in general come to light. If the Father were to reduce himself in favor of the Son, we would have not grace, but sacrifice. The Father does not shrink to make room for the Son and the Holy Spirit. Shrinking would be sacrifice, but there is no sacrifice in God. The Father occupies the whole place and there is no room for anyone else. Then the Son arrives and the entire space of Deity is now at his disposal. At most, sacrifice may be an implementation of grace. Metaphorically, we can say that the Father empties himself out and allows the Son to pass through ahead of Him. This is a translation of grace in the ethical logic of sacrifice, though. Grace is the impossible possibility of filling a space twice, of finding room in a space already completely occupied. It has ontologically to do with addition, not with renounce. We should not imagine the Impossible as nourishment that comes from above, filling a void; on the contrary, we should imagine it as radical overcoming of the physicalist seizure of space and want for space. Whereas, according to Weil, grace is filling the void, from the author's point of view grace is filling the full.

1. Definitions

1. Grace is represented by the simple formula $X = X^*$. Being – also – is represented by the same formula. Therefore, grace is the law of being.
2. $X = X^*$ is the law of miracle; this formula expresses the necessity of multiple filling. Everything is necessarily more than itself. Every space is necessarily filled completely more than once in the same sense and at the same time.

2. The Holy Trinity

3. Nowhere as in the idea of the Holy Trinity, the overcoming of the principle of narrow or strict (self-)identity comes to light. The Father is really different from the Son and from the Holy Spirit, nevertheless the three persons amount to one God. Therefore, the space of the only deity is multiply (thrice) filled. The Father fills completely the entire space of deity: there is no more room for the Son and for the Spirit. Nevertheless, the Son and the Spirit find place: that is grace. Grace is

therefore not only and not primarily a mode of relationship between God and mankind; grace is the rule of God. Inasmuch as grace is the law of the divine being, an image of grace is likewise the law of being *qua* being.

4. Grace is not sacrifice. On the contrary, grace is the opposite of sacrifice in the field of religious language (and experience). If the Father were to reduce himself in favour of the Son, we would have not grace, but sacrifice. The Father does not shrink to make room to the Son and the Holy Spirit. Shrinking would be sacrifice, but there is no sacrifice in God. The Father takes place and there is no room for anyone else. Then the Son arrives, and lo: the entire space of deity is now at his disposal (Where did the Father end up? He ends up nowhere, he doesn't disappear. The Son is *added*, but God doesn't become greater, since the addition [*] does not come from the outside). Sacrifice can be at the most an implementation of grace. We can metaphorically say that the Father empties himself, that He allows the Son to pass through ahead of Him. This means translating grace into the ethical logic of sacrifice¹.
5. A logic of grace (& disgrace), a logic of addition is therefore requested. The Father fills completely the available space of divinity in its entirety. We can define this one a condition of complete satisfaction and plenitude. The Christian religion doesn't settle however for completeness or fullness. Completeness is not enough: addition is requested. Every Christian dogma has to do with this multiple filling. Christ fills – as a man – the entire individual space at his disposal. How could you shove also a divine nature into the same sphere? The bread fills completely the sacramental space at our disposal. How could someone fill it twice through the body of Christ? Divinity itself must deal with a problem of saturation. I define “Fundament” the complete divinity, the divinity in its entirety, and “fundamentalism” the idolatrous adoration of the plenitude of divinity. Fundamentalism is therefore the theoretical and sentimental position of being scandalized by the obscenity of addition. The Son is the first addition, the stumbling block.
6. The Father is the divinity, and the divinity is God. In the state of divine beatitude, we get this calm (and abstract) identity of God with the Father. There is only one God, the Father is the Only One (*Der Einzige* – Fr. Hölderlin). There is no room for the Son: *quia non erat eis locus* (“there was no room for them”: *Lk.* 2:7) is not only a historical remark, but a mystical one, concerning the very nature of divinity². This very nature is grace, i.e. multiple filling.
7. Addition is disturb. The Son – much like any son – is supposed to disturb the calmness and stillness of God the Father. Contemplative life (for example,

¹ Grace is the opposite of ethics, because ethics remains in the field of physicalism. There is no space (no bread, or what have you) for both of us, and I decide to give way. If I could fill the space twice, there would be no need to step aside. In this sense, grace is the opposite of sacrifice and effort. A state of grace would be a world of the “already”, where what still needs to be done, has always already been done. Here the arrow of time would be reversed, because I would be looking for the means to do what I have always already done. Writing a book in the state of grace, would mean something like unrolling a scroll (*Lk.* 4:17). You first have the book, than you open (write) it.

² There was no place for the Son in God, and there is no place for him on earth: from this point of view, there is no difference between earth and heaven.

philosophical life) has never been a quest for tranquillity, rather a quest for the essential disturb at the bottom of it. Contemplative life is therefore something like a repetition of the divine mystery of essential disturb.

3. *Contradiction?*

8. The law of contradiction never deals with restriction of space. The logical space is always perfectly filled, like a wall by a modular kitchen. You are never confronted with the puzzle of an extra wall unit. Mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive as they are, the elements of a contradiction fit perfectly into the logical space. This fitting-situation doesn't account for the *theological overbooking*, which is the starting point both of a theory of the Holy Trinity and of a theory of grace. In a world "already possessed" (Malthus), like the present one, where no vacant room is free for "fresh comers", an Aristotelian theory of distribution starts showing crevices not only from an ontological but also from a political point of view.
9. So, grace could be a phenomenon of distribution, after all: more or less in the sense of Jesus' feeding the multitude. The distribution, however, is not a primary fact, but a secondary one. We achieve the goal of distribution through the long detour of saturation and addition. The principle of contradiction doesn't stop working in theology: theologians often distinguish for example the deeds or sufferings of Christ in the capacity of man or in the capacity of God. The law of contradiction, however, works here as a generator of space. The entire space is already sequestered. There is no space for humanity in the person of the Son and no space for divinity in the individuality of Jesus. Before we eventually distribute his actions and properties (e.g. mortality) on the side of divinity or humanity, we need generate an extra space, and that is grace. If you are an Aristotelian theologian, like Aquinas, you can say that the two natures of Christ are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive, but you should add that this is impossible, because you would be counting the same individual space twice. The principal dogmas of Christianity suggest that being qua being is addition, not that being qua being is one, as Boethius and Aquinas thought. Christ – as the Holy Trinity – is a perfect example of our theoretical genome: $X = X^*$.
10. Also in the field of economics, we observe that distribution of wealth is not possible without growth. It has been seldom noticed that the principle of economy – as the so called analytic philosophy vindicates it – is not economically consistent. The so called principle of economy refers to an elementary stage of development, e.g. the household budget. Economy in the contemporary meaning of this word – however – doesn't work along these lines. Economy implies profit, which is impossible, without creativity or the invention of something new. We have no economy without *added* value. If a philosophical analyst should observe that being is not addition, because this would violate an elementary principle of identity, we could always easily answer: "It's the economy, stupid".

4. *Disposedness*

11. We can abductively inquire about the “disposedness” (mood, *Befindlichkeit* [Heidegger]) of God the Father. How could the Only One deal with disturb? With the impossible? With the unreasonable request to fill the same space twice? We know nothing about God, but we can reflect on the puzzle of multiple filling and its affectivity. Imagine: there is no more room, but there is the necessity to make room for the other. What is to be done? Normally we would react through violence (elimination of the intruder) or sacrifice (contraction/renunciation of the first owner); we would search for extra room, so that we could better distribute the occupants. Distribution is perhaps the greatest invention in dealing with saturation. But what, if *ex hypothesi* no extra room is available?
12. A(n affective) logic of grace & addition could start from the state of *satisfaction* and plenitude (*Erfüllung*, as German philosophers would say). Room is available, and someone/something fills it completely and comfortably. Nothing is missing. The experience of addition is potentially painful: something seeks to enter a space already “possessed” and this determines a pressure increase. *Pain* has therefore its root in the very structure of the divine being. To put it better: we are looking for the condition of possibility in God of a series of feelings, which God is supposed *not* to experience. What in God is addition, could be pressure and pain for us.
13. That is why we need a logic of “disposednesses”. We have already mentioned *violence* and *sacrifice* and *distribution* as fundamental means to deal with addition. Another means of dealing with addition is *expansion* or extension: a huge concentration of energy can cause an explosion, as in the initial big bang. *Creativity* (divine, natural or human) is inconceivable without a form of intrinsic or internal excess³. Another means of dealing with addition is playing. *Play* is a mix of violence and sacrifice, of withdrawal (“please, after you”) and self-affirmation. We can imagine that God is playing: the assertiveness of the One is accompanied by the humility of the Other, in a continuous mutual exchange: *alternation* (with its immanent fluidity) is therefore another means to face the puzzle of addition.
14. *Laughter* (Bergson), *joy* for *surprise*, and *horror* are basic reactions in front of the sudden appearing of the unexpected double bottom (or false bottom) of reality. If addition is a kind of double bottom of reality, a kind of *duplicity* and *ambivalence* is unavoidable. If you don’t want an ambiguous world, you don’t like the world. The Good is ambiguous in itself: long before the ambiguity between good and evil is arising, an ambivalence within the field of the *pure* Good (*qua* pure Good) has already arisen. God is swinging, an internal *oscillation* is not to be removed from his/her very nature. On the contrary, this swinging seems to lay the foundations for the *freedom* of God (and of mankind too).

³ The Holy Spirit could be understood as the unavoidable explosion of creativity born from addition.

5. *Vested Nudity*

15. One, is always One*. You cannot divide the Being from its asterisk, and a kind of starred language is ontologically (and theologically) unavoidable. Starred language (as David Lewis would call it) is suitable for starred ontology. You should not separate being from its additions. The divide passes not so much between the X and its asterisk (X // *), but to the left of the X (// X*).
16. When Plato invites us to hammer off the rocks and shells which have grown around the statue of Glaucus in a wild profusion; or when Plotinus urges us to discern the nature of the soul, stripping it free of all that has gathered about it, we should think of a *restitution of the soul to its original additions, not to its supposed nakedness without addition*.
17. Nudity is not a natural condition: only after the original sin, Adam and Eve realized they were naked. The natural condition of mankind seems rather to be something like a dressed nudity. As a matter of fact, the artistic depiction of *Graces*, from Botticelli to Canova, represents them as nude-in-their-clothes. Grace – in the aesthetic sense of the word – means the impossibility of a separation between the body and its veil. Joy, Radiance, and Flowering (the three Graces) are not so much entities in themselves but intrinsic ways of entities. You cannot have the aura (the radiance, the light a face emanates) without the thing it surrounds.
18. Still in the depiction of catholic saints, and especially of the Virgin Mary full of grace, the halo seems to express the plenitude of being with its additions. The crown of a queen is a natural addition like that, and the popular belief interprets the state of being “born with the caul” as a sign of good luck. So, grace is the condition of being born “with the shirt” (as the Italian language would say). Grace is vested nudity: not a nudity, which is simply dressed with different garments than the usual ones, but a nudity clothed in itself (*an und für sich*), where you cannot give up the clothing without removing the skin.

6. *Starred ontology*

19. Starred ontology means: you cannot have the thing without its natural interpretation (its natural way). If you deprecate an abuse (e.g. domestic abuse), you are saying that a subject is always a subject*. The asterisk – here: the interpretation of subjects as respectable – is the intrinsic radiance of the subject (let’s say, her/his personality): if you remove the radiance, you have a bare subject, like a bare X without the star. A bare X – however – is an *ens deminutum* (a diminished thing). To be itself, the X must be *accompanied* by its fellow-asterisks. The evil, in this sense, can be defined as the removal of additions or the substitution of the original additions with adulterated ones. If being *is* addition, we are never without additions, but sometimes – or often – we are in the company of the wrong ones.
20. A philosophical reconstruction of history could therefore distinguish an age of unity, where a thing is never separated from its additions, an age of separation, where a thing is reduced to a bare particular and/or is evilly dressed, and an age of reunion,

where the Inseparables (X & its asterisk) are together again, but not without a caesura, a fault line reminding of previous remoteness.

21. “Human rights” are – in the present state of being – a weak equivalent of grace. Nude people are normally dressed with political rights, but they can always lose them, being left alone with their human rights. Without political rights, however, people find themselves pretty scantily clad, almost like bare particulars.
22. Assuming that being is dressed nudity, being *is* technique. We cannot have the clothes without technique. We should nevertheless differentiate between natural and artificial technique. God him/herself is a kind of (living, natural) machine, who helps him/herself, preventing him/herself from being naked, viz. from being just him/herself (God is not alone, or: only God is never alone, *Deus solus ist numquam solus*). Loneliness is namely a kind of nakedness. The present/finite state of being, on the contrary, shows signs of a relapse into nakedness and loneliness. Technique is no longer self-help, no longer intrinsic exteriority or structural event: natural addition becomes *mere* addition. We have no longer the dressed nudity of grace, but a mere nakedness, *eventually* covered with clothes. Being remains technique, but technique becomes an artificial remedy, ceasing to be a natural one.
23. Doubtless, the formula $X = X^*$ runs the risk of highlighting above all what we could dub the *state* of grace, to the detriment of the conception of grace as an *event*. That wouldn’t be a minor defect. My attempt, however, is not to belittle the importance of events, but to think of an original state-event. God him/herself, as it were, is caught off guard by the surprising addition of him/herself to him/herself. This surprise is what we usually name the eternal generation of the Son. The fact remains that we are not God and usually and for the most part we are not in a state of grace. Usually water is not changed into wine. If my penholder holds five pens, it hardly can hold six, or seven or ten. If a jar is already filled to the brim (see: *John* 2:7), we can hardly fill it twice, without first pouring the original contents. There is no addition, save a mere or extrinsic one. What we name a “grace”, could therefore be also described as the “scientific” experiment to fill twice the jar. “Grace” – as dressed nakedness – is the impossible condition of remaining naked and still be dressed, of remaining without bread and still be satiated (see: *Mt.* 7:9).

7. *Filling the void or filling the full?*

24. A comparison with Simone Weil’s influential concept of grace could here be helpful. Weil conceives of grace as *the right form of filling*, whereas my endeavour is to interpret grace as (the right form of) *double/multiple filling*: “Grace fills empty spaces but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void”⁴. The principal enemy of grace is therefore, according to Weil, imagination, as the false form of filling: “The imagination, filler up of the void, is essentially a liar”⁵.

⁴ S. WEIL, *Gravity and Grace*, Engl. transl. E. Crawford and M. von der Ruhr, Routledge, London and New York 2002, p. 10 (*To Accept the Void*).

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 16 (*Imagination which Fills the Void*).

“The imagination is continually at work filling up all the fissures through which grace might pass”⁶.

25. Nakedness is unbearable for us: “No human being should be deprived of his *metaxu*, that is to say of those relative and mixed blessings (home, country, traditions, culture, etc.) which warm and nourish the soul and without which, short of sainthood, a *human* life is not possible”⁷. Grace would be the strange – impossible⁸ – situation of being naked, void of everything (including the *imagination* of grace)⁹, and yet being clothed and full. That’s why the “mere existence” is paradoxically the condition closest to God: “No terrestrial finality separates the workers from God. They alone are so situated. All other conditions imply special aims which form a screen between man and pure good. But for them no such screen exists. They have nothing superfluous of which they have to strip themselves”¹⁰. But we shouldn’t test the Lord: “We must not seek the void, for it would be tempting God if we counted on supernatural bread to fill it. We must not run away from it either”¹¹.
26. So, grace is really a kind of dressed nakedness after all, according to Weil. Compared to our idea of multiple filling, a contact at the heart of a chiasmus is here on stage. Weil admits a state of mere (or void) existence, without additions, and lo, we can be full (of light¹², of supernatural bread) all the same, if God wills. The X brings to expression the mere life; the false asterisk is imagination, the true asterisk is grace. We have here a divide between the X accompanied by the imagination and the X accompanied by the true star of grace (X^I/X^G). Being however is not a nudity vested in itself, like in the artistic depiction of the Graces, but nakedness waiting for its star. So grace remains something extrinsic: in the “spiritual realm [...] we must wait for everything to come to us from outside”¹³.
27. On the contrary, our suggestion is to conceive of nude, mere life as a departure (due to the original sin?) from the additive structure of being; of grace (and technique in general) as reconstitution of that additive structure; of the Trinitarian life as the equivalent of grace in God (as its source in God): the Father fills up completely the space of divinity, *there is no void*, and lo, the Son and the Spirit are added. Grace is not the filling of a void, but the addition, which presupposes plenitude
28. Simone Weil knows that we desperately need clothes: “Lauzun and the office of Captain of Musketeers. He preferred to be a prisoner and Captain of Musketeers rather than to go free and not be Captain. These are garments. ‘They were ashamed of their nakedness’”¹⁴. In Walter Benjamin’s words, the nude life is a life without

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 147 (*Metaxu*).

⁸ “*The good is impossible*” (*ibidem*, p. 94 – *The Impossible*).

⁹ “[...] the imagination which *fills up empty spaces*. We can affix a variety of labels to it, often with a show of truth, including righteousness and God. If we suspend *the filling up activity of the imagination* [...]” (*ibidem*, p. 48 [emphasis added] – *Necessity and Obedience*).

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 180 (*The Mysticism of work*).

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 23 (*The Desire without an Object*). “[...] nakedness of spirit [...] We must give up everything which is not grace and not even desire grace” (*ibidem*, p. 13 [*Detachment*]).

¹² See: *ibidem*, p. 3 (*Gravity and Grace*): “feeding on light”.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 127 (*Training*).

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 23 (*The Desire without an Object*).

garments; the life of the living, a dressed life¹⁵. Weil carries out an experiment: is it possible to reduce yourself (or to be reduced) to mere life, and – notwithstanding – being dressed of grace? She knows very well the affliction of “life without form”, “hideous as life in its nakedness always is, like an amputated stump, like the swarming of insects”¹⁶. She is not so much interested here in developing an ontology, but in the distinction between imagination and grace (the false and the true star). She tells us that a naked life is impossible: “We must eliminate affliction as much as we can from social life, for affliction only serves the purposes of grace and society is not a society of the elects”¹⁷. We must distinguish between impossible forms of filling the void: grace and not-grace (the latter distinguishable in mere imagination and other *metaxu*): “To will the void. For the good which we can neither picture nor define is a void for us. But this void is fuller than all fullnesses”¹⁸.

29. Weil sought an equivalent of gravity at the spiritual level. This concentration on spirituality (the reverse of “human mechanics”)¹⁹ in its almost mechanical features (“There are necessity and laws in the realm of grace likewise. Even hell has its laws [Goethe]. So has heaven”)²⁰, leads her sometimes to a kind of metaphysical rationalism: we must reduce ourselves to nothing in order that God may be all: “God gave me being in order that I should give it back to him”²¹. Grace requests “decreation” (which is not “destruction”)²². If we make no room for God, He cannot enter us. This is the general law of spirituality.
30. The paradoxical nature of mysticism is notwithstanding not to be missed. Great mystics (from Plotinus on) emphasize the importance of removing all additions and eliminating everything (ἄφελε πάντα [V 3, 17, 38]). Eliminating *everything*, and not just the superfluous or unnecessary additions, is however the safest way of validating *everything*. Mysticism is the art of removing in order to confirm, of taking in order to give. Otherwise, we wouldn’t really understand the difference between destruction and decreation. The mystic longing for nakedness/elimination, is a desire for universal natural clothedness/validation: everything is eliminated only to be added. Mysticism means complete acceptance of completely refused world, absolute faith and radical atheism at the same time. “This world, in so far as it is completely empty of God, is God himself. Necessity, in so far as it is absolutely other than the good, is the good itself”²³. “God and the supernatural are hidden and formless in the

¹⁵ See: W. BENJAMIN, *Critique of Violence*, in ID., *Selected Writings*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings, 4 vols., Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1996-2000, vol. I, p. 250.

¹⁶ S. WEIL, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 28 (*The Self*). “Human injustice as a general rule produces not martyrs but quasi-damned souls. Beings who have fallen into this quasi-hell are like someone *stripped* and wounded by robbers. They have lost the *clothing* of character” (*Ibidem* [emphasis added]).

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 158 (*The Social Imprint*).

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 13 (*Detachment*).

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 5 (*Void and Compensation*).

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 92 (*Balance and Lever*).

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 40 (*Self-Effacement*). “When I am in any place, I soil [*je souille*] the silence of heaven and earth by my breathing and the beating of my heart” (*Ibidem*, p. 42 [transl. modified]).

²² *Ibidem*, p. 32 (*Decreation*). Decreation nevertheless is not annihilation, because “by uprooting oneself one seeks greater reality [*plus de réel*]” (*ibidem*, p. 39 – *Decreation*).

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 109 (*He Whom we Must Love is Absent*).

universe [...]. Christianity (Catholic and Protestant) speaks too much about holy things”²⁴.

31. From an ontological point of view, the question remains: should we imagine the Impossible as a nourishment which comes from above, filling a void, or should we rather imagine it as the radical overcoming of the physicalist capture of room and want for room? My suggestion is that grace is the impossible possibility of filling a space twice, of finding a room in a room already completely possessed. It has ontologically to do with *addition*, not with *renounce*. The point of this distinction is that grace is not sacrifice. Sacrifice (renounce) is just an image of grace in the mirror of “gravity”.
32. In a nutshell: according to Weil, grace is *filling the void*; from my point of view, grace is *filling the full*.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 56 (*Illusions*).